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Why Does Placelessness Matter?: Nadine Gordimer's "Teraloyna"

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This article assesses the crucial role played by placelessness in the fiction of a writer who never allows her readers to lose sight of the referential coordinates and political implications of her stories. "Teraloyna" in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump* exemplifies the growingly complex narrative strategies that she came to develop over time in her attempt to achieve a greater directness in her writing whilst putting stronger emphasis on the opacity of her medium. At first sight placelessness – whether it involves the fable, allegory, the intertext or metalepsis – seems to take us away from place to better return to it. But this odd tale invites us to think the "making it strange" of place further, against the dangerous temptation to lock everything into place.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer, placelessness, allegory, referentiality, short story

Why does placelessness matter? For anyone vaguely familiar with Nadine Gordimer's work, the question may sound slightly surprising at first. "Why does *place* matter?" would appear as a far more relevant question as Gordimer lived in a place that she never considered leaving and never stopped writing about, namely South Africa. Her fellow-writer, J.M. Coetzee, once talked about South-African literature as "a literature in bondage," "the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison."¹ Yet, interestingly enough, whilst tied to the here and now, Coetzee's novels largely rely on places that do not exist, "non-places," or impossible places. One may recall the imaginary, hybrid, strangely familiar and resolutely strange world of *Waiting for the Barbarians* or the dystopian landscape of *The Life and Times of Michael K*. One may also remember, incidentally, Nadine Gordimer's biting remarks in her review of *Michael K*:

J.M. Coetzee, a writer with an imagination that soars like a lark and sees from up there like an eagle, chose allegory for his first few novels. It seemed he did so out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everybody else living in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write. So here was allegory as a stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock. He seemed able to deal with the horror he saw written on the sun only – if brilliantly – if this were to be projected into another time and place. (Gordimer 1984, 139)

¹ "In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination." (Coetzee 1992, 99)

Gordimer's suggestion that the use of "another time and place" could just be a means of keeping one's distance from "grubby reality" is something that she might have re-examined when she published *Jump* seven years later. Oddly enough, the collection where Gordimer achieves a new directness in the depiction of the explosive situation in her country can also be described as a multiform experiment in distancing and displacement. The first story of the collection, "Jump," introduces the reader, blindfolded, into a non-place: a deserted hotel in an unnamed country. The problematic inscription in time and place contaminates the narrative itself, a narrative which, we are led to understand, is the repetition of a repetition of a tale that has been told so many times before. "Grubby reality" is there indeed, but in spectral form. It is clear in this case that placelessness is by no means a way of escaping place, it is the manner in which one finds oneself "up to the neck" in reality – a condition the reader is led to share with the character.

The fact that place and placelessness are not necessarily to be opposed but might actually go hand in hand finds yet another expression in a story called "Teraloyna," the name of a place which is not to be found on any map. The story is an odd one, hard to place in the collection, potentially a reason why critics tend to skip it entirely. It appears very quickly that Gordimer has gone for the full allegorical mode, "the writer's conscious choice of it" rather than "its choice of him/her," to use an opposition she resorts to in her review of *Michael K*.² It is certainly the line of interpretation that critics tend to take when they do mention "Teraloyna." In the overview he devoted to Nadine Gordimer's writing after she was awarded the Nobel Prize, Dominic Head concisely presented the story as "an allegory of racism and ecological mismanagement in a fictional island, in which brutal environmental controls are explicitly linked with violent racial repression" (1994, 177). Head's reference to allegory harks back to the late 1980s, the decade of the so-called "scramble for post-colonialism" (Slemon 1994) and the debate that opposed Fredric Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad and Stephen Slemon about the use of allegory in what Jameson then called "Third-World literatures." Slemon pushed back against Jameson's contention that the national allegory was a necessary (and, implicitly, a predictable and limiting) feature of the post-colonial literatures. He argued instead that the trope, overwhelmingly present as it is, functions in a much more subtle and devious way than Jameson allowed, namely as a counter-discourse that subverts and contests the allegorical forms through which colonial regimes assert their authority.³

"Teraloyna" admittedly lacks the limpidity of an allegory speaking in no uncertain terms. There is something about it that is, literally, all over the place and pulls the reader in various directions. This causes a disruption in the semiotic regime of a figure of speech conventionally requiring "the one-to-one correspondence of object and meaning" (Beer 1983, 80).⁴ "Teraloyna" is indeed informed by a tension between a mainland which, unnamed though it remains, is clearly modeled on the South Africa of the State of Emergency years and, on the other hand, a fabulous island whose name evokes the placelessness of the tales beginning with the spell-binding words "far, far away in a distant land," a formula the narrator echoes when s/he comes up with the following gloss for the French toponym: "'Terre' – earth, 'loin' – far: the far earth" (Gordimer 1990, 103). The contrast between the referential regimes of the placeless fable and its realistic counterpart, its counter-place, is all the more striking as "Teraloyna" never settles into one or the other of these two modes. Unlike "Once upon a Time," "Teraloyna" does not start as a realistic anecdote before morphing into a fable, but neither does it begin as a tale blurring coordinates before finding its actualization in a realistic coda, as is the case in

² "Allegory is generally regarded as a superior literary form. It is thought to clear the reader's lungs of the transient and fill them with a deep breath of transcendence. Man becomes Everyman (that bore). From the writer's point of view, allegory is no more than one among other forms. But I believe there is a distinction between the writer's conscious choice of it and its choice of him/her. In the first instance, loosened by time from ancient sources of myth, magic, and morality, allegory is sometimes snatched from the air to bear aloft a pedestrian imagination or to distance the writer, for reasons of his own, from his subject. In the second instance, allegory is a *discovered* dimension, the emergence of a meaning not aimed for by the writer but present once the book is written." (Gordimer 1998, 139)

³ Examples abound, from the colonial allegory of the "family of man" Anne McClintock analysed in *Imperial Leather*, to Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899).

⁴ "Whereas in allegory the one-to-one correspondence of object and meaning is sustained, in analogy the pleasure and power of the form is felt in part because it is *precarious*." Beer's opposition relies on a classical conception of allegory that does not acknowledge the deferral of meaning which, deconstructionists after Paul de Man have argued, is constitutive of the trope's undecidability.

“My Father Leaves Home.” Instead, the narrative shifts between two planes and two referential regimes, shuttling, on the one hand, between an island that cannot be placed, and which the narrator makes a point of erasing from existing maps, and, on the other, a mainland that echoes with the clamour of the anti-apartheid struggle.

But distinct though they are, the two regimes are not incompatible. The narrator and the characters move across the two distinct diegetic spaces over time, from Teraloyna’s beginnings in a long-forgotten shipwreck to the contemporary present when the mainland government sends a party of “healthy young white men” (Gordimer 1990, 107) to eradicate the wild cats that have by then colonized the island. The short story comes to a head with a close-up on the thoughts of one of the militiamen who, even as he is flying towards the distant island, remains unaware that he is being taken back to the land of his ancestors:

He is looking forward to the *jol* he and his mates will have, singing and stamping their army boots in the aircraft [...], the prey they will pursue – this time grey, striped, ginger, piebald, tabby, black, white – all colours, abundant targets, doesn’t matter which, kill, kill them all. (107)

This passage elicits several questions: Why resort to the fable of a punitive expedition against cats to evoke the many interventions Pretoria launched over the 1980s to counter revolutions in South Africa’s neighbouring countries, from Mozambique to Angola? Such is the suggestion implicit in the narrator’s use of “this time,” a concession implying that there have been precedents when the victims’ skin colour was not as variegated as the coats of the felines now roaming the ravines of the island. Put differently, what is the fable telling us that a realistic account fails to convey? What is to be gained from the making it strange of literature which, in this particular case, is a making it far, a distancing, an *Entfremdung*?

What finally takes place, as the gunmen from Soweto land on non-existent Teraloyna, is not a simple encounter or merger, but a violent collision, a metaleptic transgression which gives another turn of the screw to the freakish nature of the story created by Gordimer. The reader is left with an odd, fantastic object that eludes definition, a monster of sorts which both begs and blurs recognition. The choice of an allegorical non-place may be regarded mostly as a discursive device, a weapon illustrating Gordimer’s pressing need to vary the angles of the shock tactics she develops in *Jump* – far from the critical realism to which she is mostly associated. Yet, more than just a detour that allows the writer to better return to the reality of a place, the alien or “allon” dimension of the story creates a lasting disturbance which problematizes the representation of place. There are unsuspected depths in Teraloyna. If the reader cares to reflect on the passing allusions made to some major works of the Western canon, the story gains an amplitude which it may seem to lack at first. As for the odd, impure, placeless object that results from the experiment, it is hard not to connect it with a lethal desire to place, separate and label meant to sort out the pure from the impure: an old story that never seems to lose its relevance.

Placelessness: Making up Place from Other Made-up Places

“Teraloyna” takes the form of a story of origins which is twofold: it sketches the journey of those who initially came to that place, Teraloyna, and then left it and settled all over the world; simultaneously it charts the chief transformations of the place itself as it came to be inhabited, deserted and taken over again. In both cases this story about displacement relies heavily for its meaning on the aesthetic displacement it performs. While the reader follows the tracks of those who leave, the focus, as the title indicates, is nevertheless very much on the place itself, a place which is twice the setting of a disastrous natural, or rather unnatural development: we are told first about the introduction and multiplication of goats after a shipwreck, their complete destruction of the vegetation of the island and their own eventual death for lack of food; this ecological disaster is followed by another episode of uncontrolled animal reproduction when two pet cats (introduced at a much later stage by meteorologists after the island has become a weather station) start a family and, as they multiply, produce creatures that turn feral.

These two episodes leave us in no doubt that we are reading a fable of sorts, yet the simplicity and clarity we associate with the fable is replaced by a sense of disorientation that immediately imposes itself. The second sentence of the story “Othello called here” unwinds what will become a red thread in the text, but it yields no obvious meaning, twisting logic instead: a Shakespearian character is supposed to have journeyed to an island which is as fictional as he is, but somehow had to wait for

Nadine Gordimer to invent it before he could land on it. Not only does Gordimer's tale of origins start in a lopsided, metaleptic manner, but little by little we come to recognize in it both a mixture and a distortion of scraps of religion, science, myth, and literary works belonging to the Western canon. The island is indeed no Paradise and the animals that get saved from the waters do not have the privilege of displaying the variety of those who came off Noah's Ark: "a place for goats" (Gordimer 1990, 99). Diversity has been replaced by sameness; natural selection is no longer so natural once man sets foot on the island; as for the survival of the fittest, it leads mostly to extinction and extermination. The text, like the phenomena it describes, gives us the impression of an uncontrolled multiplication. The parallels that accumulate certainly foreground one main idea: something has gone wrong, something has not turned out according to what was written. At the beginning of "Teraloyna" is a shipwreck – a shipwreck which brings to mind so many other shipwrecks. At the beginning of the story is another story, many other stories which Gordimer can only re-write. The distortion at work in "Teraloyna" affects the very concept of origin: the made-up place reveals what Gordimer can only do as a writer, namely invent and reinvent how things came to be and what they became, knowing that things never turn out as planned. Placelessness comes to be recognized as the very place the writer inhabits, a place from which her own map gets drawn from what others have left behind.

While foregrounding the fictional nature of the story, we could argue that the multiplication of allusions or associations constantly displaces us to bring out a number of motifs and patterns on which, beyond particulars, the reader can focus. "Teraloyna" is a story about colonization, forced displacement, domination and subjection, a story which casts an ironic light on the pastoral ideal that inspired their vision of the land to South African writers of European descent.⁵ It evokes diversity and its exact opposite: the progressive cancellation of difference for the benefit of one kind – until that benefit turns into a terrible plight. It is a story about the blindness and irresponsibility of human interference. The invention of a people whose blood runs in everybody's veins, unbeknownst to them, also carries another fairly transparent message. Placeless, the island of "Teraloyna" becomes an uncluttered stage on which key issues can be given a particular relief. In the midst of all the questions that loom, some allusive yet insistent references nevertheless invite us to stop awhile.

Sailors' Tales

The incipit of the story is set off by an unusual layout. Blank spaces separate its two short sentences from the body of the text, which encourages the reader to pause and consider the genealogy of distant islands through which European colonial powers have been rehearsing the story of their expansion, each fresh iteration mapping the way the West imagined the world. Likewise, each of the two opening lines reads like a fresh beginning branching out into families of stories which have grown so familiar to Western eyes that it may take an invasion of domestic cats gone feral to restore an impact to their initial, demonic content:

A place for goats – we all must leave.

Othello called here.

That's all it was fit for, our island. The goats. [...] (Gordimer 1990, 99)

The double reference to goats conjures up the *topos* of the desert island which Daniel Defoe, in his own time, borrowed from Greek romances, themselves the continuation in prose of sea journeys harking back to Homer's epics.⁶ Something so startlingly new grew out of these familiar motifs⁷ that *Robinson Crusoe* came to be recognized as a completely *novel* genre, after Defoe had injected into it

⁵ See the seminal chapter devoted to "farm novel and *plaasroman*" in Coetzee's *White Writing* as well as Bunn's article on the influence of the pastoral in early representations of the South-African landscape.

⁶ "That's *all* it was fit for": the appraisal has the bitterness of thwarted pastoral dreams, a note that recurs in widely different contexts whenever the land is envisaged in terms of yield. Compare, for example, Telemachus's words to Menelaus: "In Ithaca [...] there is no vast plain for horses to run nor any meadows. It is a place for goats, not horses and chariots. Most of the Greeks' isles are this way, you know, Ithaca most of all" (Homer 2001, 106), and the thoughts of the central character in Coetzee's *Disgrace* when he first sets eyes on his daughter's farm: "poor land, poor soil [...]. Exhausted. Good only for goats" (1999, 64).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of Defoe's sources, see McKeon.

his contemporaries' preoccupations with the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, the parallel development of individualism with early capitalism, and the encounter with indigenous populations which would forever alter the way the West defined itself.⁸ The goats on Teraloyna swam ashore with the survivors of a shipwreck impossible to date, the Ur-story of European colonial expansion. The Teraloynas intermarry with the indigenous people from the neighbouring islands who teach them how to catch the local fish and survive on the island (Gordimer 1990, 100), again a recurring first-contact scenario. As the two populations mix and settle the interior, the plot runs along parallel lines to *Robinson Crusoe*'s, with a number of major differences though. The plantation-cum-penal colony the eighteenth century thought could reform the individual soul and cure Western society of its ills no longer offers the remedies Defoe devised for it, when he followed in the footsteps of the writers and philosophers to whom the placelessness of the distant island had given the liberty to imagine a microcosm where to test their political hypotheses. Here too memorable precedents abound, spanning the centuries that separate the present moment from Columbus's first transatlantic voyage with a series of overseas stopovers, among which Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) and, another decade after *Robinson*, Jonathan Swift's pamphlet "A Modest Proposal" (1729), in which the cure for Ireland's overpopulation is inspired by tales from far-flung places, most of them islands impossible to locate except in Swift's imagination.

Contrary to the Spanish mutineers who will stay and thrive on Robinson's island once chastised for their disobedience, the Teraloynas will be forced to leave after the goats that came with them have taken possession of the island and eaten the last blade of grass growing there. The ecological disaster is one that Defoe's age of trust in toil and progress could not have foreseen, but which is clearly present in the stone terraces that cover the whole island in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), and are briefly mentioned as a trace of the first human occupation on Teraloyna, after its vegetation has disappeared and the topsoil has washed away (Gordimer 1990, 100). The environmental dimension of the fable was undoubtedly eclipsed in the eyes of the critics of the 1990s by the political challenges of the interregnum. It is also likely that an eco-critical reading of "Teraloyna" may be more in tune with current preoccupations with extinction in the age of the Anthropocene when the line between fact and fable has undergone some readjustments. During the unprecedented drought of the summer of 2020, for instance, snipers were airborne to the Australian desert to kill thousands of camels gone feral, after the non-native animals started pushing around populated areas in their search for water.⁹

The connotations of the word "desert" have also changed. In the eighteenth century, its meaning did not rule out the idea of lushness, as evinced by Robinson's enraptured descriptions of his surroundings once he has regained faith in God, and his own faculties, and the "barren" island he first beheld turns into an earthly paradise (Defoe 1971, 53). Two centuries later, the adjective "desert" implies less an absence of people than the dystopian prospect of desertification that looms ahead of the successive stages of colonial development, from deforestation to the setting up of plantations, the extraction and exploitation of resources leading in time to waste and exhaustion (Stoler 2013). "Teraloyna" is informed by a similar process of ruination that has its inception in the failure of the pastoral, both an aesthetic and an economic horizon in the "white writing" which, Coetzee and others after him argued, envisioned South Africa through the picturesque prism of a "metropolitan landscape tradition that enabled the naturalization of the settler presence" (Bunn 2002, 156). The short story offers a *contradiction* to the genre of the novel, insofar as it self-consciously writes back to Defoe, picking up on the goats Robinson needed to stay alive, fed and fully clothed, but also on the cats that kept him company on the desert island (Defoe 1971, 64, 148). The original motif of Robinson's dominion over the animal world is reinterpreted as an ecological tragedy which strikes not once but twice, as the feline invasion reiterates and aggravates the disaster brought about by the ravenous goats. The duplication is all the more effective as it takes place within the limited scope of a rather brief short

⁸ While sifting through *Robinson Crusoe*'s political legacy, Derrida sums up James Joyce's reading of Defoe's novel as "the prefiguration of an imperialist, colonialist sovereignty, the first herald of the British empire, the great island setting off to conquer other islands, smaller islands (like Ireland) but above all islands bigger than it, like Africa, New Zealand or Australia [...]" (2011, 16). We are grateful to Thomas Dutoit for the reference to Derrida's seminar.

⁹ In the 1800s, the British imported camels from distant parts of their Empire, in India and Afghanistan, to help with construction and transportation in the Australian outback. Camels have proved less resilient to drought than other, native species whose access to water and ultimate survival they now jeopardize (Osborne 2020, n.p.).

story, seven pages at most, where the woeful ending is adumbrated from the start. The second line of the incipit, “Othello called here,” does not so much introduce the tragic motif as it reintroduces it by activating the emblematic significance of the figure of the goat, *trágos* in Greek,¹⁰ standing at the forefront of the tale.

All in all the name of the tragic hero crops up five times in “Teraloyna.” Mentioned twice on the first page, it recurs on page 101 – “there is a legend that Othello was blown in to anchor at the island” – where it is preceded by an additional reference to Laurence Olivier’s memorable performance. The character of Othello is invoked one last time in the short story’s fifth section, the equivalent to a tragedy’s final act: “Othello would turn about in horror from an island of demons” (Gordimer 1990, 104). In allegorical terms, the tragedy of *Othello* may seem less illustrative of the colonial condition than *The Tempest*, another “island of demons,” known to have exerted some fascination on writers concerned with the decolonization of minds, from Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête* (1969) to Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* (2016). Gordimer, however, shifts the scene to another venue: “Othello called *here*” (emphasis added). Because the deictic points to a place of enunciation that is impossible to place, the statement has a destabilizing effect on the reader who feels prompted to ask “but where exactly is *here*?” The answer, it would first seem, lies in the oral tradition, the yarns told by those who sailed beyond the continents delineated on Renaissance maps, into blanks provisionally filled with fabulous monsters and grotesque sea-creatures. These placeless places and the phantasmagoria attached to them inspired in Othello the tales that won him Desdemona’s heart, her hand, and the consent of the Venetian senate whose grumbling disapproval dissolves into spell-bound attention when the Moor tells them in turn of his adventures at sea (cf. 1.3). Even in the age of airborne travel, the island’s contours remain associated with the image of a speaking mouth, in sharp contrast – a dash gives visual relief to the opposition – with its absence on maps:

Those of Teraloyna descent [...] sometimes fly in Business Class over their island: down there all wrinkled and pleated in erosion, all folds (the ravines where the goats held out so long) and *dark inlets edged at the mouth by the spittle of the sea – it is not marked on the coloured route map in the flight magazine provided in each seat-pocket.* (Gordimer 1990, 103; emphasis added)

The description introduces a refrain, another feature of oral tales, that will be taken up in the aerial perspective of the airborne militiamen whose landing brings the story to its climactic end (107). The importance of voice is enhanced from the start through the polysemy of the verb “called,” to express whereabouts that have no bearings except in the art of oratory. Readers are thus subtly reminded that the Moor’s eloquence succeeded where Caliban’s failed. The tragedy of *Othello* does not rule out the possibility of interracial unions, and racial difference is not the main cause of Othello’s tragic downfall, even if it arguably contributes to it. *The Tempest*, however, excludes the mixing for which nineteenth-century scientists will coin the word “miscegenation.” Caliban’s coexistence with Miranda ends with an attempted rape, to the exclusion of other possible relationships, among which those explored in *Othello*. In *The Tempest*, the alternative to Prospero’s prohibition is so outrageous that only Caliban can picture the consequences of it: “O ho, O ho! Would’t had been done! / Thou didst prevent me – I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (1.2.347–49).

Peopling the isle with mongrel cats, the offspring of a “pretty black queen with a beauty patch of white on her cheek and a ginger tabby tom” (Gordimer 1990, 104), is the scenario of excess “Teraloyna” deploys against the tragic perspective of a purgation of passions and a restoration of order, even if, ironically, young men “under orders” (107) are finally flown in to bring everything under control. Although the story ends on a call for purgatory violence, the cruelty of the militia’s rallying cry, “kill, kill them all” (107), is undercut by the ludicrous image of muscular youths in army boots stomping after their scampering prey. Tragedy is *in extremis* replaced by farce, a mixture of dread, disgust, and most of all ridicule that lets a disturbing aftertaste subsist after the story’s last line has simultaneously announced and cancelled the idea of a return to purity and peace. Scientific control is similarly mocked and turned into satire when the cause for mayhem is disclosed. Careful measurements and all possible forecasts were defeated after a meteorologist “brought two kittens with him from the mainland [...]. They slept in his bed for a year” (101). More than a fleeting detail, the last sentence is fraught with suggestions of an unseemly intimacy between bedfellows whose physical closeness may lead to all kinds of grotesque congresses and metamorphoses already perceptible in the cats’ anthropomorphized aspect. This unforeseen development, an outrageous outgrowth, muddles the

¹⁰ *Trágos* is the Greek word for *goat*, a clear indication that classical tragedy had its origins in ancient scapegoating rituals.

clarity of the allegorical subtexts – the promises of the adventure novel and the teachings of the tragedy, twisting them all into satire. The genre of satire was derived from the Latin *satura*, a gastronomic favourite in Ancient Rome, an extravagant dish that mixed an abundance of sweet and savoury ingredients and from which the verb “to saturate” also stemmed (Serres 1983, 205–6). Farce,¹¹ the French word for *stuffing*, is another genre with culinary antecedents, namely a combination of offal and meat leftovers with breadcrumbs, herbs and spices. The inclusiveness of literary satire and farce similarly involves hazardous alliances between high and low, the serious and the ludicrous conducive to improprieties and excesses quite incompatible with the cleansing rituals that maintain purity, the exclusions that restore order and, subsequently, effect closure in classical tragedy. As it finally depicts the terrifying multiplication of the ferocious mongrel cats and the plan of their eradication, the short story inevitably raises the question of who is the real monster, the so-called “animal.” Who or what is the pest that needs to be eradicated?

Place With or Against Placelessness: Congruence or Collision?

“The island is not near anywhere. But [...] it is nearest to Africa” (Gordimer 1990, 102): this is what the reader is told in the middle of the story. S/he may remember at this point that the colonization of South Africa started with a shipwreck which led to the first settlement in Cape Town’s Table Bay. Spatial proximity in this case forces our gaze towards a land that exists: contiguity invites analogy and analogy questions in its turn the referential regime at work in the text. One could argue that the ending ties the various threads of the story neatly together, ultimately suggesting that reality and tales are closer than one may think: the introduction of “thousands” of “healthy” white “males” (106) may seem somehow as wondrous as the proliferation of the exceedingly vigorous cats. Yet conversely, the fanciful tale gets as real as the stories you read in the newspapers: there was certainly no lack of young men “proficient in handling firearms” (106) during the Emergency, no lack of guns with which some thought everything could and must be solved.

However, the odd effect produced by this combination of the real and the made-up, of place and placelessness remains. We feel that the heterogeneity of two modes of representation must be preserved to allow a clash within the text. From the beginning, the voice that emerges from an uncertain now (“We must all leave”) and that posits itself in relation to an indeterminate somewhere (“here”) deflects the timeless voice of the timeless storyteller: it places the story in a “distant land” that cannot quite be equated with the nowhere of legends. The various markers of orality (“of course,” “the fact is,” or “well”) and the colloquial inversions (“That’s all it was fit for, our island”) that mimic the spontaneity of speech suggest that the enunciator may be talking from somewhere close to us. Indeterminacy is reinforced when the initial “we,” a collective, transgenerational, and transgeneric entity morphs into a “they,” at the point “when the islanders left towards the end of the last century” (Gordimer 1990, 102). Faced with a spectral voice and uncertain coordinates, the reader is somehow allowed to float in an uncertain in-between until the last two pages where he is presented with a “fact” (“the fact is [...]” 105), and suddenly watches the story being firmly pinned down on a contemporary map.

The faraway, imaginary Teraloyna gets so abruptly displaced/re-placed that the reader may feel s/he has been shaken out of the tale, brought back on this side of the world after hovering about in a strange, made-up patchwork of a place. Could we go as far as to say that Gordimer’s reservations towards the allegorical mode lead her in this story to sabotage her own fanciful variation on the robinsonade (after having nevertheless made good use of it)? Does not made-up, placeless “Teraloyna” find itself discarded to make room for a bloody, ugly, “grubby” and very real South Africa? Such shock tactics are not unusual in *Jump* and we can find a clear dismissal of the poetic mode in a story like “Once Upon a Time.” The meaning of “Teraloyna” could thus lie in the collision between place and placelessness as much as in their specular relation: we shift without transition from a relation of similarity or analogy to a metonymic and metaleptic juxtaposition which blows up the barrier between the realm of fiction and the realm of fact. Must we understand this collapse Of barriers

¹¹ In the thirteenth century, farce initially referred “to phrases interpolated in liturgical texts,” a signification subsequently “extended to the impromptu buffoonery among actors that was a feature of religious stage plays.” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O27-farce.html>.

as an attempt to provide an immediate access to a place of emergency? Or is it rather to the transgression itself and to the necessity for transgression that we should lend significance?

The idea that there is a simple solution to all is conveyed with a sufficient dose of bitter irony for us to doubt that the writer has finally renounced the complexity of the storyteller's task of which she continuously proves she is all too aware. As we can see in "Once Upon a Time," Gordimer plays *both with and against* such modes as the fairy tale, the fable or the allegory. The sophistication of the collection in terms of narrative technique (its multiplication of screens in particular) is a clear indication that no innocent relation to fact and historical reality can be maintained and reclaimed. Placelessness matters not just because the displacement on which it rests strips meaning of unnecessary details and delivers it with greater clarity. In this case, Gordimer mostly uses the power of defamiliarization which characterizes the allegory whilst renouncing its purity of line. The reader must be displaced, carried all over the place so as to question her/himself. S/he must be faced with the opacity of the medium. And s/he must be brought back to reality and place in a manner which is equally strange and defamiliarizing once one has got used to the language of allegory. Ultimately a jump is required: the transgression the story operates may then be read as the only way to make up for the impossibility of bypassing representation. Placelessness matters because there is no place for a naive approach to "grubby reality" in Gordimer's fiction, it matters *despite and because of* her stark realism.

Arguably "Teraloyna" is not the easiest of Gordimer's stories. In a way it is as misshapen and unpleasant as what it describes, yoking together what does not really go together in terms of place, of genre and of interpretation. In its invention of a fanciful origin and lineage, it can also be considered to mock the obsession with ancestry and the fantasy of purity which appears in the desire to label and classify people by race and colour: "The Teraloynas are an obscure curiosity in the footnotes of ethnologists. [...] The Teraloynas occupy no twig on the family trees of white people" (Gordimer 1990, 103), but they are part of those "scarcely-identifiable bastard groups as the St Helenans" (103). They are ubiquitous because they are so racially mixed as to have become indiscernible, and therefore impossible to place. Their impurity challenges the "spatialization of race and the racialization of space" (Vidal 2019, 41) characteristic of colonial slave-holding societies, a reversible formula that could certainly be extended to the history of racial segregation in South Africa and its implementation under the name of "apartheid." But as opposed to the clarifications of history, there is something about the placelessness of "Teraloyna" that literature only has the power to re-present and therefore reconfigure. Such is the value of the iterations and displacements that inform this short story and the shock of recognition they are meant to cause in the reader. In *Jump*, Gordimer recurrently portrays her characters as hovering above place: one nameless character looks at the agitation of crowds down below from an air-conditioned room in a high-rise hotel, while another group tours the *veld* speeding along endless dusty roads. Another runs through suburbs and gets lost in a black township, or flees from one never-quite-safe house to the next. In all of these situations, the stories end in a moment of suspension, and the characters never hit the ground. What will happen at the point of landing? There is no answer to this question, which is one way of framing the unknown sea surrounding "that unrecognized piece of earth, poked up out of the sea" (103).

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